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Employees' morale's in the toilet, but their poop's in the hallway

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First came U.S. EPA's fake spy, John Beale, followed by the agency employee who watched pornography on the job for several hours a day. In the latest case of outrageous misconduct, someone has been putting feces in the hallway at EPA's Denver office.

In February, EPA management issued a memo to employees in EPA's Region 8 office, asking them to help track down the guilty party.

"As some of you may be aware, there have been several incidents of inappropriate behavior in the building. A couple of examples include an individual clogging the toilets with large amounts of paper towels and an individual placing feces in the hallway outside of one the restrooms," wrote Howard Cantor, Region 8 deputy administrator, in the memo obtained by Greenwire and first reported by Government Executive.

Before that memo was issued, someone had been clogging up the toilet and urinating on the floor in the women's restroom, said an EPA employee who spoke on condition of anonymity. "The poop thing -- I don't know if it happened more than once. They ended up spreading that in the hallway," the employee said, adding that the incidents appear to have stopped since the memo was issued.

"I think most people were surprised," the employee said. Some employees were "probably grossed out about it. Others are just disturbed that something like that is happening."

Cantor's memo said EPA managers had consulted with John Nicoletti, a national expert on preventing workplace violence, about the incidents, adding that Nicoletti told them it was "very dangerous behavior" and that the individuals involved would probably escalate their behavior.

"Management is taking this situation very seriously and will take whatever actions are necessary to identify and prosecute these individuals. You can assist us by letting us know if you have any information about a specific incident," Cantor wrote.

A Region 8 spokesman referred a request for comment to EPA headquarters in Washington, D.C. EPA spokeswoman Alisha Johnson said, "EPA cannot comment on ongoing personnel matters. EPA's actions in response to recent workplace issues have been deliberate and reflect the agency's commitment to ensuring a safe work environment for our employees."

The EPA employee said it's no secret that morale isn't high at the agency. "We've been under attack for quite some time now and sort of vilified. So you take that and you put on top of that recently we offered early-outs ... there are less people to do the work," that person said.

Earlier this year, EPA trimmed its staff by offering buyouts and early-outs to employees across the country, trimming more than 500 workers from its staff nationwide and putting a damper on already low worker morale (Greenwire, Feb. 21).

EPA's Denver-based Region 8 location is the local office that oversees Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming and 27 tribal nations. The region had 544 permanent employees last November, including offices in Montana and a laboratory in Golden, Colo.

This latest incident of EPA employee misbehavior is certain to attract attention from the agency's critics, who have used recent examples of worker misconduct as ammunition in their battle against the agency's policies (E&E Daily, May 8).

The EPA employee feared that coverage of the incident in Region 8 would further hurt the public perception of the agency and morale at EPA. "One would hope that a story like this that comes out, that something constructive comes out of it," that person said.

Timothy Dimoff, a workplace violence expert and president of SACS Consulting Inc. in Akron, Ohio, has seen similar instances of workers lashing out like this.

"There seems to be a trend of sorts where workers really want to use abnormal responses, defecation, urinating in areas, some very obscene cartoon characterizations of certain management in the bathrooms in the halls," he said. Dimoff has previously worked with a large facility where employees were urinating into containers in different areas of the building, he said.

Problems like these aren't limited to federal agencies. "I don't see any prevalence of government versus private; I see it happening in both," he said.